The Militant Image

28. 9. – 16. 11. 2014

This exhibition project speculates on how, in these insurgent times, images become militant by addressing the present as "a process of emergence" similar to Lauren Berlant's reuse of Raymond Williams. The militant image then is tied into, and productive of, structures of feeling that cohere through time contesting the dominant, recirculating the residual, and joining the energy of the emergent. Spaces of struggle—such as national liberation, regional autonomy, or place-based struggles—are not necessarily more residual or indistinct today, but they are—in this period of surveillance, migration, and biopolitical and state power—differently constituted. How, in this oscillation of the temporalities of the present, can a militant image cohere with what the geographer Neil Smith calls "the revolutionary imperative" that he identifies as a compelling historical force? Can we assume a new aesthetic regime of visibility for militancy or does militancy only become visible when it is in the making?

The militant image is necessarily inside the very social conditions that it is shaped by and reacting against. Specific forms of power generate particular forms of militancy and the militant image reflects the plurality of power: the militant image is a part of what is already going on. The exhibition "The Militant Image: Picturing What Is Already Going On, Or The Poetics of the Militant Image" recognises a multitude of militancies, each of which calls for a particular aesthetic approach. So as not to lapse into mere pluralities, our curatorial aim is based on productive antagonisms which bring forward various types of militancies and modes of militant representation. These forms of militancy overlap temporally, spatially, and politically. The militant image is half the past's and half the future's even as it is grounded in the historical occasion of the present.

4 Lauren Berlant, op. cit., p. 7.

Raymond Boisjoly

Boisjoly's work troubles the representation of Indigenous or First Nations people by running it through mediations that are both technical and cultural. For this exhibition, Boisjoly has produced a text–image work with the phrase, "Where we were is no longer where we are and where we will be is not yet" (2014). This seemingly direct statement alters an understanding of both the present and the temporality of agency and indigeneity. This seemingly direct statement alters an understanding of the temporality of the present as neoliberal now, the now of the end history. But within a frame of the colonial present forced upon First

Raymond Boisjoly, Silent Trans-Forming, 2014.

Hassen Faiyadi, Still is Us / from Nicht lesbibares Feuer / Incognoscible Fire, 1999.

"The Militant Image", Camera Austria, September, 2014
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Nations people, this sentence takes on the militancy of critique and of an utterance that requires a response. The alternative temporality invoked is also informed by Indigenous literary constructs that signal the presence of the past and tradition. Of the politics of language and representation in his work, Boisjoly has said: “I am interested in the way something like ‘colonialism’ can never be regarded directly, but only glimpsed in the specific mechanisms that come to impact colonised populations.”

Harun Farocki

This 1969 film, “Nicht löscharbaves Feuer” (“Inextinguishable Fire”), by Harun Farocki catches the problematic of the militant image: how can an image, any image, possibly represent the technology and devastation of war as they were emerging in Vietnam? Farocki’s film addresses this problematic of the counter economies of affect and carefully avoids shock as the affective attunement. Instead, “Nicht löscharbaves Feuer” sets out to make a case through facts, staged scenes, and sublime agit-prop against the nexus of science, war, and capital. The militancy of Farocki’s film is both in its aesthetics and in its intent—to fight the use of napalm before it becomes an inextinguishable fire, it must be stopped at the point of production: “When napalm burns, it is too late to extinguish it. You have to fight napalm where it is produced: in the factories.” “Nicht löscharbaves Feuer” holds in balance a moment when protest, refusal, and militancy shortened a brutal war, but it insists on the relationship of the historical occasion, specific action, and the militant image.

Peter Friedl

Peter Friedl amassed what he calls a “lyrical” collection of newspaper photographs of protest images from across the geopolitical spectrum from 1992 to 2010. A selection of these images, which Friedl also characterises as images of “public integrity and intimacy”, were ordered according to their historical chronology rather than their publication in the global infoscape when they were first published by MACBA as a brochure in 2006. This recirculation of newspaper images disrupts the media framing known as the “protest paradigm” which portrays protest as a spectacle of confrontation and buries the actual causes of the protest. The project’s title “Theory of Justice” also refers to the American philosopher John Rawls’s examination of the role of justice within a well-regulated society in A Theory of Justice. Rawls’s take on the social contract based on a distribution of rights and responsibilities has been battered by neoliberalism’s splitting of rights and responsibilities and its rendering of the social contract to individuated success and failure. But, Friedl’s modified title, with the singularity implied by A Theory of Justice dropped, turns back to a larger questioning of justice and its pictorial representation today.